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Changing The Conversation: Diversity At Living History Museums

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CHANGING THE CONVERSATION: DIVERSITY AT LIVING HISTORY
MUSEUMS

by

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DEDICATION

To my family and friends for their steadfast love, support, patience, and
enthusiasm

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must first acknowledge my thesis director, Allison Marsh, who spent time reading and rereading drafts that were oftentimes not in complete sentences. Thank you for putting up with my bullet point format for months and my attempts at explaining why I had nothing to turn in that week. You helped me find direction when I was hopelessly lost and overwhelmed. A tremendous thank you to my thesis reader, Claire Jerry, who provided invaluable insights and encouragement along the way.

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I am grateful for my experiences at Old Sturbridge Village. Without be invited to try costumed interpretation, my ideas may never have been fully realized. This paper is proof that great things come out of new opportunities and will remind me to be open minded about the unknowns in my future. Thank you to the interpretation staff at OSV who allowed me to pick their brains and engaged in difficult discussions about diversity and the future of OSV's interpretation. A very special thank you to Katie Hill, Ryan Beckman, and Tom Kelleher who were gracious enough to let me conduct oral histories with them.

A final thank you to my amazing family who have given me nothing but love and unwavering support through the years. Words are not enough to express my level of gratitude.

ABSTRACT

"Changing the Conversation: Diversity at Living History Museums" explores the lack of diversity among costumed historians at living history sites. Using Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts as a case study, this paper traces the history of diversity among costumed staff and the interpretation at the site. I suggest solutions and ideas for interpretative planning to increase the representation of minority perspectives into the historical narrative of the site and include more ethnic and racial diversity among the employed costumed staff.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“No, I am not a Pilgrim, No, I am not Amish, No, I do not live here, and Yes, I am actually hot in this costume.”¹ These answers to some of the most popular visitor questions appeared on the back of a 2012 intern T-shirt and accurately described my experience interpreting at Old Sturbridge Village during the summers of 2014 and 2015. From beneath my bonnet, I daily entertained these inquiries from visitors who came to our site with preconceived and often misinformed notions about New England history. Their notable confusion made me wonder about visitors’ experiences at living history museums and has driven me to ask how interpretational challenges, such as the lack of minority perspectives, might be improved.

Living history museums combine historic architecture, material culture, and costumed interpretation with natural and cultural landscapes to create an immersive learning environment that can offer the visitor a sense of traveling back in time. Costumed historians make history come alive through interactions that formulate social, cultural, and political connections with the past. If museums are to help interpret the past for the public and build relationships between past and present, important opportunities

¹ I am hot in the costume, but on a hot day I would be warm regardless of what I was wearing. It is a common misconception that because we have less skin showing, we are more negatively affected by the heat than visitors in modern clothes. Based on the type of work performed (farm labor, cooking, etc.) the clothing was designed to protect the body. The material is also usually cotton, which is a much more breathable fabric than modern synthetic fabrics.

for engagement and learning are lost when visitors do not comprehend the role of a costumed interpreter within a living history setting. As the examples above demonstrate, visitors are often prompted to ask questions based on the interpreters' appearance and their direct observations. If visitors to a living history site only encounter white interpreters, then they are missing ethnic and racial perspectives that are part of the larger historical narrative. When sites increase the ethnic and racial diversity of staff, the interpreters have the power to change the conversation and address minority perspectives at the site and attract a more diverse audience.

Does diversity in museums matter? Representation, or the lack thereof, of racial, ethnic, and economic diversity in museum settings is a growing problem in the museum field, particularly among costumed historians at living history museums. Museums and historic sites serve as valuable educational resources and are reflective of how people view society and construct knowledge, power, and relevance.² It becomes detrimental to the museum audience for museums to exhibit or interpret stories where some people are in, while others are decisively out or obscured. When minority groups do not see representation of their cultural heritage in museums, the message is being sent that museums, intentionally or not, are advocating a predominantly white culture.³ This schism contributes to the sense of whose history, stories, and knowledge matter and whose do not.⁴ Museums should endeavor to promote and preserve a shared culture, achievable through more diverse interpretation, exhibition, and programming.

² The Inclusion, "Why Think about Equality and Museums?" March 23, 2015.

<http://inclusion.com/2015/03/23/why-think-about-equity-and-museums/>

³ The Inclusion, "The Danger of the 'D' Word: Museums and Diversity," January 20, 2014.

<http://inclusion.com/2014/01/20/the-danger-of-the-d-word-museums-and-diversity/>

⁴ Ibid.

There are two major concerns regarding diversity at some living history sites whose challenges, excuses, and solutions are intertwined. The first is a clear deficiency of minority perspectives (ethnic, racial, economic) in the interpretation, exhibition, public programming, and marketing. The second is an absence of ethnic and racial diversity among costumed staff at sites that do not directly interpret slavery or have a Native American village on site. These problems are rooted not only in the interpretation and curatorial departments, but also in administration and development. Administrative practices, such as hiring procedures, and institutional challenges, like shifting priorities and struggling financial states, can influence the public perception of the site and dictate decisions affecting diversity in interpretation and among costumed staff. Administration and historians at sites set the historiographic policy for the site, but it is ultimately the interpreters on the frontlines who interpret the site to the visiting public.⁵ These decisions made behind closed doors can unknowingly or deliberately impact the visitors' experiences. One way to transform the visual narrative presented to visitors is to more visibly incorporate minority perspectives into the main historical narrative of living history museums.

However, striving for diversity should not stop at simply including minority perspectives. Modern America is more racially and ethnically diverse now than it was in the past, especially in historic New England. Museums are forced to address the issue of a constructed image of historical accuracy in a twenty-first century society that seeks diversity and racial equality. Can Arab Americans, Asian Americans, or Latinos interpret

⁵ Eric Gable, "Mainstreaming boundaries, or 'mainstreaming' black history in a white museum," in *Theorizing Museums: Representing Identity and Diversity in a Changing World*, ed. Sharon Macdonald and Gordon Fyfe (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 177.

in a time and place where historically they were not present? Living history museums are centered on the visual, so the race and ethnicity of the interpreter would inevitably be noticed by the visitor. The question then emerges: Does the race or ethnicity of the interpreter change the interpretation? At a living history museum which employs third person interpretation, in which the interpreter neither portrays a historical character nor represents a specific time period and worldview, the answer should be no.⁶

This paper will explore these questions and ideas of diversity and representation through a case study of Old Sturbridge Village (OSV). OSV is a living history museum in Sturbridge, Massachusetts that focuses on interpreting everyday life in rural New England in the 1830s. The site utilizes third person (non-character) costumed historians to help interpret the site. OSV has had the reputation of being an ‘old white people’s village’ since its founding in 1946.⁷ This perception of the village had the potential to change starting in the late 1990s when several researchers and interpreters focused on displaying and interpreting a more diverse historical narrative. Eventually, full time Native American, African American, and ethnically diverse costumed staff members interpreting at the village were added. However, important steps taken to increase diversity at OSV were halted in the early 2000s due to administration priority changes and a lack of funding. As Tom Kelleher, curator, historian, and interpreter at the village noted, “Everything cost time and money and diversity is costing too much time and

⁶ First person interpretation must occur in costume because the historian is fully immersed in portraying a character of a different time period. Most interpreters at living history sites have a background in history or conduct significant historical research in order to effectively and accurately interpret to the public. Third person interpretation can be done in either period costume or designated staff attire. Third person interpretation in staff attire is the standard interpretation for museum guides or docents at most museums. The terms costumed interpreter and costumed historian are used interchangeably throughout the text.

⁷ Oral history conducted on July 30, 2015 with Katie Hill.

money.”⁸ Looking towards the future, OSV again has the opportunity to increase diversity at the museum by reintroducing minority perspectives into the main historical narrative of the village through exhibitions and interpretation, and a reevaluation of their hiring and advertising methods in order to attract and appeal to a more diverse applicant pool and audience.

“Diversity” is a vague term with a multitude of definitions and meanings, oftentimes associated with race. Diversity has often been a line between black and white, but the issue of diversity among historic sites extends beyond this simple designation. Many scholars have explored the difficulties of interpreting slavery along racial lines, with an emphasis on who has the right to tell the history of African Americans.

Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites, edited by Kristin Gallas and James DeWolf Perry, provides a comprehensive overview of problems and strategies involved in interpreting the sensitive subject of race and slavery at historic sites. Other texts have included articles discussing gender and racial diversity in museums among both museum staff and visitors. *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment* edited by Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig in 1989, *Theorizing Museums: Representing Identity and Diversity in a Changing World* edited by Sharon Macdonald and Gordon Fyfe in 1998, and *Museums, Equality, and Social Justice* edited by Richard Sandell and Eithne Nightingale in 2012 are all works that include articles on inclusion of minorities in museums. Although work has been done to evaluate the racial and ethnic composition of museum professionals across departments, current scholarship is lacking on other types of diversity. Academics and museum professionals need to expand their categorizations

⁸ Oral history conducted on October 22, 2015 with Tom Kelleher.

and redefine diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender, age, economic status, regional differences, as well as cognitive, emotional, and physical needs. Part of this gap is due to the time interval between professional conversations and publishing a book or series of articles. Conversations among museum professionals deliberating the lack of diversity is currently transpiring in informal venues such as blogs, journals, online articles, and conference presentations, and the amount of discussion being generated indicates published materials are in the foreseeable future.

Your problem is my problem

The lack of diversity, racial and ethnic, in a museum setting is not limited to living history museums or interpretation. Administrative, curatorial, marketing, education, and other departments within the museum field are also struggling with these issues. In 2015, The Mellon Foundation, in cooperation with the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) and the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), published the results of its survey, “Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey.”⁹ The study was conducted to assess the diversity of museum staffs across America.¹⁰ Although the results show an unacceptable lack of diversity among museum professionals, the survey does provide a model for future surveys.¹¹ There is also work being done to attract a more

⁹ This survey was a continuation of a \$2 million proposal initiated by the Mellon Foundation in 2013 to create undergraduate curatorial fellowships for diverse students at various art museums in the United States.

¹⁰ The Foundation commissioned Ithaka S+R of New York in 2014 to create the survey that was administered to 77% of AAMD institutions and 15% of additional AAM cohorts. 90% of the museum staffs were located in the United States; the other 10% were from Canada and Mexico.

¹¹ In assessing positions, including curators, conservators, educators, and leadership (director, chief curator, head of education etc.), the results showed those positions were held by 84% Caucasian, 6% Asian, 4% African American, 3% Hispanic, and 3% two or more races. All information and results are from “The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey,” compiled by Roger Schonfeld, Mariët Westermann, and Liam Sweeney, July 28, 2015.

diverse audience to museums. The Center for the Future of Museums, through the American Association of Museums, submitted a report in 2010 entitled “Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums.” The research evaluated the current ethnic and racial composition of current museum audiences and began a conversation within the profession on how to better cultivate a more diverse group of visitors.¹²

Recently, students at Public History programs nationwide have begun to ask questions about not only the state of the field in terms of diversity, but also the lack of diversity among students in Public History programs. These students will be the next generation of museum professionals, so it is important to discuss why programs are not appealing to a wider applicant pool. Several blogs on History @ Work, through the National Council on Public History, have contemplated these types of questions and have been generating conversation about issues and solutions relating to diversity. Based on a working group from the 2009 NCPH annual conference, “How Do We Get There? Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Public History Profession: Continuing the Discussion,” Angela Thorpe published a series of blog posts about rethinking diversity in the public history field.¹³ She concluded that diverse audiences may not feel welcome at places in

https://mellon.org/media/filer_public/ba/99/ba99e53a-48d5-4038-80e1-66f9ba1c020e/awmf_museum_diversity_report_aamd_7-28-15.pdf

In response to the dismal outcome, Elizabeth Merritt, Director of AAM’s Center for the Future of Museums, said “To thrive in the long term, it is crucial that museums bring the demographic profile of their staff into alignment with that of the communities they serve. This will require challenging a broad range of assumptions about how museums train, recruit and manage the staff responsible for collections, interpretation, education and leadership of our institutions. And it will require taking a hard, uncomfortable look at the conscious and unconscious influences that have shaped our institutional culture and created the current imbalance.” Brian Boucher, “Mellon Foundation Study Reveals Uncomfortable Lack of Diversity in American Museums,” *artnetnews*, August 4, 2015. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/mellon-foundation-museum-diversity-study-322299>

¹² “Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums,” through the Center for the Future of Museums an initiative of the American Association of Museums, Betty Farrell and Maria Medevdeva, 2010. <http://www.aam-us.org/docs/center-for-the-future-of-museums/demotransaam2010.pdf>

¹³ Thorpe is a recent graduate of the Museum Studies MA program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

which they do not believe they are reflected, either in museum staff or inclusion, in the historical narrative of the site. Thorpe believes that perception is reality and, in order to remain relevant to an evolving audience, public historians have a duty to work towards altering this perception and therefore the reality of the field.¹⁴ The current interpretative perspective reflected by staff at living history museums is that of Anglo-Americans. The discussion about the lack of diversity among costumed staff at living history museums and the deficiency of ethnic and racial interpretation corresponds with the larger conversation regarding diversity in all aspects of the museum field.

One of the major reasons for the lack of diverse staff members across the museum profession, particularly in interpretation, is the pay and work hours. The pay of interpreters, even permanent staff, is as low as \$10 per hour at some locations, and most of the positions are seasonal jobs.¹⁵ Costumed staff often work long hours and weekends with limited time off. While a master's degree is not usually required, a background or degree in history, public history, museum studies, or education is beneficial. The U.S. Bureau of Labor projects the job growth for historical interpreters increasing by eight percent through 2022. The average salary for full time interpretation staff was \$24,310 in 2013.¹⁶ Salary is a huge motivating factor in deciding to apply for a job and then remain at the position for a prolonged period of time. The realities of the job market and the low wages are significant contributing factors to the lack of diversity. Unfortunately, there is

¹⁴ Angela Thorpe, "Rethinking Diversity: Introduction," History @ Work, November 13, 2014.

<http://publichistorycommons.org/rethinking-diversity-introduction/>

¹⁵ OSV is hiring "Agriculture and Horticulture Interpreters" (costumed staff) for the season (April through October) to work between 16 and 40 hours per week. Position is \$10 per hour [https://www.osv.org/current-job-openings#Agriculture and Horticulture Interpreter](https://www.osv.org/current-job-openings#Agriculture%20and%20Horticulture%20Interpreter). Plimoth Plantation is also hiring seasonal "Living History Educators," but no payment information is listed. <http://www.plimoth.org/about/work-plimoth>. Colonial Williamsburg is hiring a variety of character interpreters for between \$13.31 and \$17.74 per hour. <https://www.hrapply.com/cwf/AppJobList.jsp>. All of the hourly wages are for 2016.

¹⁶ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

no simple or immediate solution to this widespread problem and financial compensation is based on the individual funding sources of each site.

In addition to the difficulties in hiring a diverse staff, interpreting race at a museum or living history site can be challenging for museum staff and interpreters. Although third person interpretation allows the costumed historians to maintain their modern identity and use contemporary language, visitors still fail to fully understand and accept the function of the interpreter as a conduit to the past. Visitor misunderstanding can also be amplified by the difficulty of divorcing the racial identity of the interpreter from the interpretation. Racial and ethnic backgrounds of interpreters could give the visitor visual clues as to what to ask, bringing to mind topics such as slavery they might not have thought about otherwise. This proves to be a particular challenge for institutions, such as OSV, that do not interpret slavery. Other drawbacks can include the racial prejudices and modern misunderstandings about African American interpreters. The question of “Are you a (or *the*) slave?” is unfortunately a familiar question for racially diverse staff members. Although the institution of slavery was a presence in the Southern areas of the United States in the 1830s, there were much fewer slaves in New England and no slaves in the original town of Sturbridge. African Americans living in Sturbridge were free men, women, and children and were business owners, factory workers, and farmers. This inability to separate racial issues at the site from the race or ethnicity of the interpreter potentially restrains the types of conversations interpreters can have with the public. African American staff members, for example, should not be the “token black interpreter” who is an expert on race because of their skin color. It is the duty of all costumed staff to be aware of the diversity issues plaguing

living history sites and be cognizant of the interpretation of minority perspectives as well as playing an active role in changing the way visitors understand and perceive ethnically and racially diverse costumed staff.

CHAPTER 2

“A REVOLUTIONARY IDEA”¹⁷

Old Sturbridge Village (OSV), one of the largest living history museums in New England, employs third person costumed historians to tell the story of 1830s rural New England. Since its official opening to the public on June 8, 1946, OSV has had a series of successes and failures in regards to implementation of minority perspectives into the main narrative of the site and inclusion of a more racially and ethnically diverse staff. The creators of OSV, the Wells brothers, A.B., Channing, and J Cheney, were sons of a prosperous entrepreneur, Washington Wells. The traditional story of the origins of OSV is A.B. Wells, unable to play golf due to rain, went antiquing with several friends. This experience sparked an interest in what he considered to be ordinary objects of New England’s history, fondly referred to as “primitives” by A.B.¹⁸ All three brothers became extreme collectors. They filled their family home in Sturbridge, forcing them to move to a second home in Walker Pond, also in Sturbridge. By the early 1930s, the collection had overtaken forty-five rooms in the Wells’ house and was deemed by the family as too significant not to share with the public. The Wells Historical Museum was incorporated in 1935 and the brothers, with the help of trusted associates, formed a Board of Trustee. The Board decided that the museum would be a “live village” or “model village”

¹⁷ “Early History of Old Sturbridge Village,” *Old Sturbridge Village Training Manual*, 2014. Quote from A.B.’s son George Wells about the idea to create a living village.

¹⁸ Ibid.

reflecting the American notion of learning by direct engagement and experience.¹⁹ OSV employed craftsman and costumed interpreters to staff the structures and demonstrate historic crafts. The guiding vision for the landscape of the site was the New England countryside. The Wells brothers asked a landscape architect, Arthur Shurcliff, to mold the land to fit their personalized vision of a country landscape, an image the site still retains today.²⁰

OSV features a condensed version of a typical rural nineteenth century New England community. The collection and education efforts focus on everyday life during the crucial years of social change between 1790 and 1840. The furnishings in the structures and the costumes reflect the styles of the 1830s. The site is not a recreation of the original town of Sturbridge, but instead contains historical structures that were brought from all six New England states to depict various social classes and traditional occupations. These structures include homes, public buildings, mills, workshops, farms, gardens, and antique buildings that are used as exhibit galleries. Instead of portraying specific characters, OSV uses solely third person interpretation in which the interpreters represent a gender, status, and occupation. Interpreters are stationed throughout the village in most of the buildings to discuss the history of the structure, explain the task they are performing, and answer general questions. In addition, interpreters will move around the village to run errands, such as tending to the animals, gathering food for cooking, or visiting a fellow interpreter. The interpreters must remain a visible presence and be accessible to the public to answer questions and pose for photographs. While their knowledge is not limited to the middle of the nineteenth century, they maintain the

¹⁹ History of Old Sturbridge, "The Wells Family," <https://www.osv.org/history-of-old-sturbridge-village>.

²⁰ Ibid.

appearance and mannerisms of the 1830s. For example, they are instructed to greet everyone with “Good day” and address gentlemen as “sir” and ladies as “miss” or “ma’am.” OSV costumed historians are cautioned not to use their personal cell phones in view of visitors, except in emergencies. It is preferred, when possible, for those who wear glasses to wear contacts instead or invest in period appropriate eye wear. Women are advised not to wear make-up. Many of the interpreters demonstrate a 1830s craft or activity including, farming, wool dying, hearth cooking, blacksmithing, pottery making, gardening, making tinware, and producing textiles.

This impetus for historical accuracy can pose a challenge to the incorporation of minorities in costume interpretation. Each interpreter at OSV is theoretically a representative of a larger historical group of people who actually lived in the original town of Sturbridge. For example, if the village had one African American in costume, then the village would historically and statistically be over-representing the presence of



Figure 2.1 Katie Hill



Figure 2.2 Tom Kelleher



Figure 2.3 Sarah Lerch

Interpreters are provided a fabric bag or basket to carry their modern personal effects and a ceramic mug, made on site at the pottery shop, to use instead of a water bottle. Costumed historians use themselves as objects to interpret the 1830s to the public.

African Americans in the area by at least five times.²¹ How does this potential over representation affect visitors' experiences? Or does it? Unless this statistic is readily available to the public, being printed on the map guide or posted on a sign, being historically inaccurate will go unnoticed by most visitors. One could argue that the visitor is being misled by the presence of all white interpreters. Although certain areas of historic New England were more racially and ethnically homogenous than other parts, it does not mean that African Americans, Native Americans, and immigrants did not coexist and interact with other rural New Englanders. The perspectives of these various groups should not be invisible at historic sites, regardless of what percentage of the historical population they composed. Living history visitor experiences are focused on the visual and sensual aspects of the site, not statistical. Interpretation should reflect visitors' needs but simultaneously push the boundaries of their expectations. A strict adherence to historical accuracy, or what a site perceives to be historically accurate, may be indirectly having a negative effect on visitors' understanding of historical diversity and race relations. This apparent disparity between historical accuracy and diverse staff should not be used as an excuse, but unfortunately is often a hindrance for museums.

From Research to Reality

One of the ways to increase diversity among costumed staff, particularly if historical accuracy is an obstacle, is to introduce minority perspectives into the main narrative of the site based on research and historical evidence. This inclusion would give minority groups a direct role to play in interpreting the site. The interpretative and curatorial staff of OSV have done significant research in the past fifteen years and have

²¹ Oral history conducted on April 6, 2015 with Tom Kelleher.

tried to add minority perspectives into the almost exclusively white historical narrative of Sturbridge. Holly Izard, a former research historian at OSV, wrote an article in 1994 that focused on Guy Scott, an African American, and his son-in-law Robert Croud, a Native American, who lived in the original town of Sturbridge. Her emphasis on the Scott-Croud family was an attempt to move beyond general understanding and delve into the details of individuals.²² The Scotts, an African American family, lived in Sturbridge from about 1810 through the 1840s and married into the Croud family. Guy Scott and Robert Croud were farmers and laborers, with Scott later becoming the foreman of the graphite mine in Sturbridge. Although it was believed that the Scott family had been fairly isolated, Izard's research revealed that the family was a part of an established Native and African American kin and social network that extended beyond Massachusetts.²³ Her discovery helped improve the understanding and interpretation of the diversity of 1830s rural New England culture and society and afforded OSV the opportunity to discuss minority perspectives at the site.

Edward Hood, former Vice President of Museum Programs, curator, historian, and archeologist at OSV, expanded upon Izard's previous work on the Scott-Croud family by collaborating with the local African American community. His 1996 article, "Unraveling a Hidden History," explored African American and Native American communities in Worcester County, Massachusetts in which the original and reconstructed towns of Sturbridge are located. In order to continue developing accurate interpretations of the beliefs and lives of African Americans and Native Americans in New England,

²² Holly Izard, "People of the Past: Guy Scott of Sturbridge: Exploring Cultural Diversity in Rural New England," *Old Sturbridge Village Visitor* (Winter, 1994).

²³ *Ibid.*

Hood wanted to work with descendants of these communities. Hood explains that this process of collaboration began by chance in 1993 when Scott family descendants visited the Research Library at OSV to learn more about their ancestors.²⁴ Through the research of social history, archeological evidence, and material culture of African and Native Americans in Worcester County, specifically Sturbridge, interpreters at the village can accurately interpret a Native and African American family as part of the historical narrative of the village.

The previous research conducted by Izard, Hood, and other staff members on the Scott-Croud house was utilized in the construction of a new structure at OSV, the Small House. Hood's 2003 article, "Housing a New Perspective on New England History," addressed how the inclusion of minority perspectives in the Small House interpretation influenced diversity at the village. The Small House exhibit at OSV was based on extensive research conducted on the Jesse Rice house, circa 1782, in Brookfield, Massachusetts, and the Croud house, circa 1815, in Sturbridge.²⁵ In contrast to the other structures on the property, which had been moved from their original location, the Small House is the only structure on the site that is not a historic building. The exhibit was built on site by the staff, between 2003 and 2007, because OSV had difficulties finding a "small house" to relocate. Many small houses in historic New England were considered starter family homes, inhabited by lower income families or newlyweds. These homes were usually one, possibly two rooms, with a root cellar and a loft and were designed to be added onto as the family grew or became more financially secure. Small houses were oftentimes rented spaces occupied by farm laborers, factory workers, tradesmen, and

²⁴ J. Edward Hood, "Unravelling a Hidden History," *Old Sturbridge Village Visitor* (Winter, 1996).

²⁵ Jesse Rice was a white farmer and blacksmith from Brookfield, Massachusetts.

ethnic minority groups (French Canadian, African, Native, and Irish Americans), accommodating two to ten or more people at one time. The Small House exhibit at OSV represents a modest home that was quite common (around 1800 about a quarter of early New England homes were roughly 400 square feet or smaller), but has largely disappeared from the New England landscape.²⁶ OSV was unable to move the Jesse Rice house to Sturbridge due to its deplorable condition, but researchers were able to effectively study and document the house before it was demolished in 1993. The exhibit interjected much needed interpretation of the village on the economic, racial, and ethnic diversity in the 1830s.

Although one of the prototypes for the exhibit was the Robert Croud house, the Small House is interpreted as a representative structure, not the home of the Croud family. Despite the significant amount of research about African and Native American experiences in New England, specifically Sturbridge, these minority perspectives have not yet entered the main historical narrative of the site. The reconstructed Small House has the potential to provide visitors with new perspectives of immigrant and Native and African American experiences. However, because of the orientation and the multi-faceted interpretation, minority viewpoints are often overshadowed and overlooked. Staff within the Small House are trained to interpret the space and its daily activities and serve as an introduction to the rest of the village and costumed staff. A sample orientation speech by the interpreter might be: “Good day and welcome to Old Sturbridge Village. Have you visited with us before?” If the visitor responds “no,” the interpreter explains, “Old Sturbridge Village is a museum that illustrates 1830s daily life in a typical rural New

²⁶ Tom Kelleher, “Small House Interpretative Scenario,” *Old Sturbridge Village Training Manual*, 2007.

England village. You will see other staff members dressed like me in the fashion of the day. Feel free to ask us anything you want.”²⁷ Because the interpretation of the structure is so open ended, there are many things to discuss with visitors, such as furniture, gender roles, industrialization, and the diversity of the types of families that would live in the house. The current Small House exhibit is a missed opportunity to exclusively explore minority perspectives at Sturbridge.

It is most unfortunate that this interpretation and the original research of the Scott-Croud family has been overlooked. It could be possible to reinterpret the Small House as the home of the Scott-Croud family and specifically focus on minority perspectives in New England while still discussing lower income housing. Because minority perspectives are not currently reflected elsewhere at the village, it is essential to designate a location dedicated to diversity. This would ensure that most visitors were exposed to and made



Figure 2.4 After the construction of the Small House, there was discussion on how to interpret the space and reflect the various ethnic and economic groups who would have inhabited such a space. One of the suggestions was to utilize objects to tell the story of different types of family groups. Each day the objects within the exhibit would be changed to reflect either Native Americans, African Americans, or Irish immigrants. Unfortunately, this plan was never put into practice.²⁸

²⁷ Tom Kelleher, “Small House Interpretative Scenario”, *Old Sturbridge Village Training Manual*, 2014.

²⁸ Oral history conducted on July 30, 2015 with Katie Hill.



Figure 2.5 Small House Interior

aware of the diversity of New England's past. However, this suggestion of revamping of the interpretation would take support from administrative, curatorial, and interpretation staff committed to diversifying interpretation at the village. Hood and Izard, chief historians on the project, are no longer working at Sturbridge. In fact, there is no longer a separate position for historian on site. Tom Kelleher's title includes historian, but he is also Curator of Men's Crafts and Lead Interpreter of the sawmill and gristmill. By not having a permanent position dedicated to the history of the site, the availability and extent of the research can be forgotten in the archives if not used. Furthermore, this oversight hinders original research occurring at the site. Museums should be sites of knowledge production. Staff members at OSV should contribute original research to the field while being dedicated to disseminating their research to a wide and diverse audience through exhibitions and interpretation.

Another exhibit at OSV has the potential to further interpret minority perspectives in Sturbridge. The Bixby House, built in 1808 and moved to the village in 1986 from Barre, Massachusetts, interprets the home of Emerson Bixby and his family. The house contains archeological exhibits based on a dig done at the original location of the house.

The building is not staffed by interpreters and only some of the rooms include period furniture. The storage room off the main kitchen in the Bixby house includes signage which interprets the space as an area where a Native American family might have stayed while traveling and completing odd jobs for money. Because the Native American perspective is not readily evident throughout the remainder of the village, this small bit of information appears out of context. The signage could easily be overlooked or ignored by passing visitors. Stationing an interpreter in or around the space increases the likelihood that visitors will stop and perhaps ask and learn about the diverse makeup of the rural New England population. The Small House and Bixby House show promise for expanding interpretation of minority perspectives, but much about African and Native American and immigrant experiences in Sturbridge is still missing.

Interacting with Diversity: Performances and Special Programing

In addition to interpretation within exhibitions, costumed historians play a significant role in how the visitor is exposed to and understands minority perspectives. Performances researched and conducted by permanent staff members are offered at scheduled times throughout the week. These performances allow the lead interpreters to write and perform skits portraying a historical character of their choice. Several of the interpreters, including Katie Hill, lead interpreter, and Tom Kelleher, historian, curator, and interpreter, took the opportunity to craft performances that included ethnically diverse characters. The performances include a first person skit, in which the interpreter speaks from the perspective of the character, and conclude with a question and answer session in which the interpreter steps back into third person.

Many of the performances feature minority perspectives, including experiences of immigrant groups who settled in New England. One of the many debates over the interpretation at OSV has been whether the village should interpret the original town of Sturbridge or New England as a whole. This debate affects the village's willingness to talk about various minority perspectives, including Irish immigrants. When Katie Hill started working at OSV in 1992, there was no discussion about immigration at the village. The research department had information on Irish immigrants in the area, but the knowledge wasn't being utilized. There were many Irish who immigrated to New England, but research showed only about eleven in the original town of Sturbridge. The disagreement over their inclusion in the narrative goes back to the discussion of over representation as a challenge to historical accuracy. Despite the resistance from other interpreters for attempting to diversify the interpretation, Hill developed a program around an Irish Immigrant named Mary Culligan. Culligan was a resident of the original town of Sturbridge, which Hill argued made it historically accurate to include Culligan's story in the narrative of Sturbridge. Hill developed the program for Halloween events at the village and since the Irish brought Halloween traditions to America, Culligan fit into the broader narrative of the time. The performance talked about jack-o-lanterns and trick-or-treating, but also addressed issues of anti-Catholicism, anti-popey, and ethnic prejudices.²⁹ The story of Irish immigration in New England also opens up discussion about other immigrant groups in the area, such as the French-Canadian and German. Hill performs Mary Culligan up to several times a week and has been a strong force in broadening the interpretation beyond Yankee Protestants.

²⁹ Oral history conducted on July 30, 2015 with Katie Hill.

“Metamora, Last of the Wampanoags” is a skit performed by Kelleher in which he portrays Edwin Forrest, a traveling actor from Philadelphia in the 1820s. Forrest was the lead actor in a popular 1830s play entitled *Metamora, Last of the Wampanoags* about Metacomet, a New England Indian ruler during King Philip’s War. Although Forrest was a white male, he was depicting a Native American and represented what New Englanders thought about Native American culture at the time. This performance allows Kelleher to talk about past perceptions of Native Americans in New England and their presence in the original town of Sturbridge.³⁰ Due to scheduling, “Metamora” is performed on an infrequent basis and is only seen by a fraction of the visitors. These performances are a good way to start the conversation about diversity at Sturbridge, but they do not make up for the lack of diversity or minority perspective among the permanent staff, interpretation, and exhibits.



Figure 2.6
(Left) Edwin Forrest dressed as Metamora in 1829. (Right) Cover of an original copy of “Metamora” written by Augustus Stone in 1829.

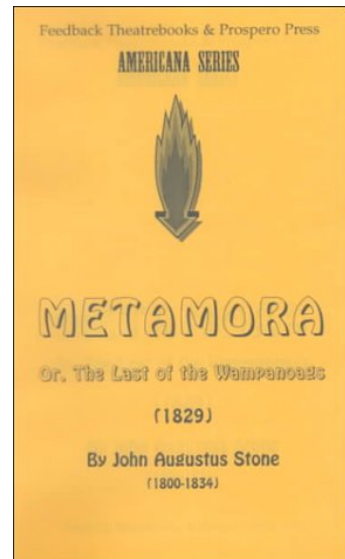


Figure 2.7
Cover of an original copy of “Metamora” written by Augustus Stone in 1829.

³⁰ Tom Kelleher, “Metamora, Last of the Wampanoags,” *Old Sturbridge Visitor*, Summer 2003, 4-5.

Another way in which visitors, particularly children, are exposed to diversity at the village is through programming by OSV's museum education department. Museum education staff offer several school programs that focus on diversity at the village, including an activity on poverty in New England society. The students are required to survey the costumed staff about their opinions on various options for caring for the poor in the 1830s including the vendue system in which care of the poor was auctioned to the lowest bidder, distributing of money and supplies directly to the poor, or raising of money to purchase a farm on which the poor would live and work. After discussing the various types of relief with interpreters, the students participate in a town meeting to debate whether the town of Sturbridge will purchase a poor farm and if so, how to raise money for the purchase. If students had participated in this activity in the late 1990s, they would have had the opportunity to speak with an interpreter who portrayed a poor woman and explained economic diversity.³¹ Unfortunately, there is no longer an interpreter depicting poverty. Economic discrepancy of rural New England life is now only shown at the Small House, but even that exhibition does not display the lowest economic means in society in the 1830s. This perspective would be especially important now that the students are exposed to and have the chance to discuss the various economic levels present in the town of Sturbridge.³²

OSV has also attempted to show diversity is through special programs and events. Sturbridge hires racially diverse interpreters for these events in an effort to open up a

³¹ According to staff, visitors would often call security about a "deranged homeless" women in the barn and it turned out to be Lois, portraying the character of a poor woman. The village also used to have a town drunk who discussed alcohol consumption and prohibition during the 1830s. Oral History conducted on July 30, 2015 with Katie Hill.

³² "Lesson Plans: Poverty," http://resources.osv.org/school/lesson_plans/ShowLessons.php?LessonID=33

dialogue at the village. Marge Bruchac, an anthropologist, historian, museum consultant, and performer of Algonquian Indian music and oral traditions, portrays Molly Geet, an Indian Doctress, at the village in a blend of first and third person interpretation to discuss the Native American experience. Bruchac participates in “Maple Days” in March at OSV demonstrating maple sugaring and winter fashions and at various events during Thanksgiving week telling Algonkian stories of thanks and giving herbal medicine walks.³³

In an attempt to increase African American heritage awareness within the village, the site has also added special events focused on African American experiences. However, these events are confined to a week in June entitled “Freedom Week: Celebrating African American Emancipation.” Tammy Denease, a living historian and storyteller, portrays Mum Bett, an eighteenth century slave who successfully petitioned for her freedom and whose actions caused a ripple effect that helped abolish slavery in Massachusetts by 1783.³⁴

These hired interpreters, who participate in special events, are important in the sharing and interpreting of minority perspectives. However, their occasional presence does not make up for the lack of diversity among the permanent interpretation staff. Furthermore, visitors’ exposure to both African and Native American perspectives should not be limited to a special event or week long programming. Instead, it should be a visible part of everyday interpretation.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Information regarding current events that discuss the Native American and African American perspective from Ryan Beckman, email interview with the author, April 1, 2015.



Figure 2.8



Figure 2.9

(Left) Molly Geet is a character created by Bruchac, rooted in her research of the lives of Algonkian Indian healers Molly Ockett (Pequawket), Rhoda Rhoades (Mohican), and Louis Watso (Abenaki).³⁵(Right) Tammy Denease portrays many influential historic African American women, among them Mum Bett.

³⁵ "History, Tradition, Performance," http://www.maligeet.net/Molly__Indian_Doctrress.html

CHAPTER 3

OBSTACLE FOR DIVERSITY: CHANGING PRIORITIES

The primary educational tool of a living history museum is costumed historians. Since a living history site is focused on visual experiences, the lack of a racially or ethnically diverse staff is a noticeable problem. Changes in interpretation and exhibition affect inclusion of minority perspectives, but the more practical issues of changing priorities reflecting the lack of funding, advertisement, and hiring practices also have impacted diversity initiatives at the village.

Part of the reason behind the decline in diversity among permanent staff members and a switch to consultants at OSV was administrative changes enacted in the early 2000s. OSV has been struggling with problems of funding and endowments since the 1970s. The 1960s was considered to be the golden age of the village under a CEO with a background in history and museums who successfully expanded interpretation and exhibitions and supported ongoing research. However, there was an underlying chronic problem of lack of funding and endowment. To try to alleviate this issue, the Board of Trustees hired Crawford Lincoln in the 1970s as CEO, a man with a business degree and a passion for history. Lincoln managed to get the finances in order while still maintaining growth of interpretation and research. Despite Lincoln's success with the finances, the village fell back into financial crisis. In the 1990s, considered by Tom Kelleher and Katie Hill to be the most diverse period in the history of the village, Alberta Sebolt George,

a former teacher and museum educator, was hired as the new CEO.³⁶

Under George's supervision, diversity began to flourish at the village. The emphasis on diversity and inclusion in the museum was a response to school groups who wanted to see more minorities represented at the village.³⁷ Also, diversity was a hot button topic at the time and various other museums in the area, including a new museum built as part of the Foxwoods Casino in Connecticut, were beginning to showcase the Native and African American experience. These museums exhibited and interpreted how Native Americans were still very much present in New England in the 1830s and yet Sturbridge was essentially ignoring them.³⁸ To appease school groups and attempt to attract more visitors, the village hired a Native American interpreter, Marge Bruchac, and an African American interpreter, Guy Peartree. Bruchac had an academic background and helped develop programs and interpretation, while Peartree was primarily a storyteller who interpreted research provided for him.³⁹ Working together with Katie Hill, Bruchac and Peartree role played scenarios in the Parsonage House, at that time a first person interpretation space which discussed minority perspectives. Hill portrayed an Irish character and discussed anti-Catholicism and immigration. When playing the minister's wife, Hill acknowledged racial prejudice by asking Peartree to enter the house through the back entrance in the kitchen. Bruchac participated in activities in the garden and led talks on medicinal herbs. The presence of Hill, Peartree, and Bruchac diversified not only the interpretation at the village, but also the public perception of OSV.⁴⁰

³⁶ Oral history conducted on October 22, 2015 with Tom Kelleher.

³⁷ Oral history conducted on October 22, 2015 with Tom Kelleher and oral history conducted on July 30, 2015 with Katie Hill.

³⁸ Oral history conducted on July 30, 2015 with Katie Hill.

³⁹ Oral history conducted on October 22, 2015 with Tom Kelleher.

⁴⁰ Oral history conducted on July 30, 2015 with Katie Hill.

While diversity initiatives were taking hold at the village, Alberta Sebolt George's focus was on the village's infrastructure. In response, she supervised the building of the Oliver White Tavern on village property in 2001. Unfortunately, the Tavern was not a financial success. Its failure was left to George's successor, Beverly Black-Shepard, whose administrative policies and practices altered the tide of positive changes in diversity. Shepard previously ran the Westchester Historical Society in Pennsylvania and was the interim director of IMLS (Institute of Museum and Library Services) before coming to OSV. She was an adept and eloquent speaker, but she walked into a situation that was beyond her expertise. She inherited a financial situation in which money borrowed and spent on construction and several years of loss revenue running the tavern resulted in a dire economic state. She also faced the challenge of severely declining attendance, which had fallen by half since 1988. This decrease in attendance was troubling for the village since it impacted the earned income and also indicated the village was no longer reaching the public like it had in the past. Shepard fell back on her previous knowledge of running a small historical society, which OSV most certainly was not, and hired consultants which led to ill-considered and desperate measures.⁴¹

Some of these actions included responding to visitor complaints of not seeing enough interpreters. Administration construed this grievance as visitors couldn't see the interpreters because they were inside buildings. The director moved all interpreters from inside the buildings to the road in order to be a more visible presence. Instead of interpreting the space, the staff ended up directing visitor traffic. This movement specifically hurt any diversity program that had been established at OSV. Removing

⁴¹ Oral history conducted on October 22, 2015 with Tom Kelleher.

interpreters from their spaces changed the kinds of conversations interpreters were having with visitors. Instead of discussing African Americans or Irish immigrants at the Parsonage, interpreters were answering directional and scheduling questions like, “Where is the blacksmith shop? When is the musket demonstration?” and “Where is the nearest restroom?” OSV became an “empty museum” as staff were replaced by videos and signs.⁴²

Despite poor choices by Shepard which negatively impacted diversity projects, she did support the building of the Small House exhibit. Kelleher tells the story that one day while out on a walk with Ed Hood, historian at the village, Shepard inquired as to what their hopes and dreams for the future of the village were. Hood, who has a background in anthropology, architecture, and archaeology, responded that he wanted to see a small house. He argued that the village was not an accurate portrayal of the past since roughly twenty five percent of the population lived in a house four hundred square feet or smaller, especially minority groups. Shepard obtained the money for the Small House project with significant support from Southbridge Savings Bank. Without her commitment to the exhibit, interpretation of minority perspectives may not have happened.⁴³

By the time the village got a new director and CEO, Jim Donahue in 2007, and returned costumed interpreters to houses and farms, most of those who had been committed to diversity had left.⁴⁴ Hill left in the early 2000s to work at Mystic Seaport,

⁴² Oral history conducted on July 30, 2015 with Katie Hill.

⁴³ Personal recollections of the day the Small House project was initially conceived courtesy of an oral history conducted on October 22, 2015 with Tom Kelleher.

⁴⁴ Shepard left the village in 2006. There is much speculation as to whether she left voluntarily or was discreetly fired. There was tension between her and the Board of Trustees when they took away her control of the finances and hired a chief financial officer who reported directly to the Board of Trustees.

but returned in the late 2000s. She found herself one of the only full time staff members, along with Tom Kelleher, actively interested in and working toward developing diversity programs. Bruchac left full time employment to work on her PhD, and Peartree was offered other jobs at various museums with better financial compensation.



Figure 3.1 The Small House was built by costumed historians using period-appropriate materials, tools, and techniques. Tom Kelleher, an instrumental figure in the construction process, is pictured far left in green vest, standing in front of the frame.

The lack of enthusiasm, dedication, and momentum by staff and administration proved an impediment to the development of programs focusing on diversity.

Furthermore, the diversity initiative was taken away from the interpretation staff and given to administration and marketing. Administration and marketing ignored diversity, in both interpretation and hiring policies, because of the financial difficulties of the village, and favored marketing and increasing visitation instead. Kelleher and Hill have both commented that support for minority perspectives in the interpretation and hiring a

diverse staff needs to come from middle to upper administration who have the power to change policies and direct funding and staff time to working on these programs.⁴⁵

In the past, OSV has had more diversity among their permanent staff members. In addition to Bruchac and Peartree in the 1990s, the staff has included an Arab American, an Asian American, and several African American interpreters as seasonal and permanent staff and as interns through the late 2000s. Michelle Jefferies, an African American staff member, applied for a position in the gift shop but was recruited into interpretation. She participated in scripted programs that took advantage of her ethnicity, but was also scheduled for routine positions such as milkmaid. Jefferies left after several years, supposedly because of pay and the mental exhaustion of explaining that she was not a slave.⁴⁶ The stories and experiences of these interpreters are really important to the dialogue at OSV about increasing diversity, but many have moved on or made the personal choice to decline contact.

Possibly, just the presence of a minority interpreter could connect minority perspectives of the past to the present interpretation of the site. Perhaps an African or Native American interpreter would be more insistent on telling the history of African or Native Americans at a historic site. But is having diversity just for the sake of being politically correct the route living history museums should take? The answer will require evaluating how visitation and visitor absorption of historical knowledge is affected by race and ethnicity. Moreover it is difficult to assess whether the ethnic background of an interpreter changes the way visitors understand the interpretation. Tom Kelleher recalled

⁴⁵ Oral history conducted on October 22, 2015 with Tom Kelleher and Oral history conducted on July 30, 2015 with Katie Hill.

⁴⁶ Information regarding Michelle Jefferies courtesy of Tom Kelleher who personally knew and worked with Jefferies. Oral history conducted on October 22, 2015 with Tom Kelleher.

that an Asian American, who briefly worked as a costumed historian at OSV in the mid-2000s, did not seem to have difficulties with visitors inquiring about his ethnicity or if there were Asians in New England. The interpreter appeared to have an easier time in costume than previous African American interpreters who were constantly being asked about their race.⁴⁷ However, this one example, is not a representative sample, and therefore it is risky to draw conclusions from this singular experience. Additional research will need to be conducted to determine the impact of interpreter ethnicity on visitors' experiences. A longitudinal study, evaluating key indicators to track effectiveness conducted by a collaboration of living history museums, could help determine which audiences they are attracting or alienating.

One incentive to increase the diversity of the staff has been to waive the volunteer requirement of 40 to 50 hours working out of costume before being allowed to interpret in costume for ethnic minorities. But, according to Kelleher, many haven't made it past the interview stage. The volunteers seem enthusiastic, but for unknown reasons they spend little or no time in costume. No one at OSV has followed up to see if this was caused by something at the village or external concerns.⁴⁸ In an attempt to fill the gap, the village has hired Native and African American consultants to demonstrate diversity and minority perspectives. The infrequent scheduled presentation allow only some visitors to get the full, inclusive narrative of the village. Regular day-to-day visitors are missing part of the story when they visit OSV.

Kelleher and Hill have both speculated as to why OSV is having difficulty hiring minorities. Hill commented on the reputation of OSV being an "old white people's

⁴⁷ Oral history conducted on October 22, 2015 with Tom Kelleher.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

village.” Back in the 1970s when Hill applied for a job, she was told by a friend that she wouldn’t be hired because they only hired WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) and she was Catholic and looked too Irish. The hiring policy has obviously changed since the 1970s, but that reputation still exists.⁴⁹ This holdover is still evident in the way OSV is advertised. The grand myth of New England’s history as being the story of a homogenous people is regrettably still being visually confirmed to visitors through the OSV website and banners lining the road. Many of the images of costumed historians used for advertisement are of white men, women, and children. This lack of representation of various ethnicities could be affecting job applicants who possibly could think there is not a place for their story or viewpoint at OSV. Conversely, it would be misleading of the village to advertise diversity they do not have. The one image of a nonwhite costumed interpreter is that of an African American female. Despite her image on the website and on a large banner lining the entryway to the village, Sasha Fisher is no longer an employee of OSV. Her assumed presence contradicts the reality of the village staff. The development and marketing departments need to give more thought to how advertising at Sturbridge reflects the current state of the village and who is being attracted or isolated by these public images.

Ryan Beckman, manager of the Historic Foodways division and costumed interpreter for fifteen years at OSV, explained that one of the difficulties in attracting a more diverse application pool is the homogeneity of the local population.

⁴⁹ Oral history conducted on July 30, 2015 with Katie Hill.



Figure 3.2 Collection of images taken from Old Sturbridge Village’s website.
<https://www.osv.org/>

Massachusetts’s 1st congressional district, in which the actual and recreated town of Sturbridge is located, is 83.8% white.⁵⁰ Additionally, it is illegal to openly search for a particular racial group of candidates, especially because OSV is not a first person

⁵⁰ The district is 3,101.14 square miles with a population of 733,426 people. 83.3% white, 6.3% Black or African American, 1.8% Asian, .03% American Indian and Alaska Native, 5.2% other. 49.1% of households make less than \$50,000 per year. Data from the 2014 American Community Survey. <http://www.census.gov/fastfacts/>



Figure 3.3 Sasha Fisher worked at OSV several summers ago as an interpretation intern.

interpretation site which casts characters.⁵¹ Salary, as noted earlier, also seems to be a factor in a limited applicant pool. A task force headed by Barbara Hopkins, an African American development employee, explored why the village has had difficulty hiring people of various ethnic and racial backgrounds. Their conclusion was not enough money being offered. The inability to advertise and hire diverse staff negatively impacts the interpretation and public perception of the village. A more racially diverse staff could engage in conversation about how to improve the historical narrative of Sturbridge in order to best include minority perspectives and increase diversity among costumed historians.

⁵¹ Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) enforces these laws and provides oversight and coordination of all federal equal employment regulations, practices, and policies. <http://www.eeoc.gov/facts/qanda.html>

CHAPTER 4

BUZZ WORD 'DIVERSITY': HOW TO KEEP UP WITH THE CHANGING TIMES

Orientation is a crucial component of any museum. The purpose of orientation at a living history museum is to acclimate the visitors to the time period, introduce them to the type of interpretation they will encounter, and establish visitors' expectations on what they might experience and learn. OSV uses various methods to clarify visitors' expectations about the costumed staff and orient them to the time period and interpretation. Previously, OSV had miscellaneous media orientations, particularly slide shows with audio and a film. These are no longer in use. Instead, the first explanation comes from the visitor center staff. The staff are instructed to provide a brief historical and interpretive background of the site and inquire about visitors' interests to help personalize their visit. Within the visitor's center, there is a small introductory exhibit addressing the presence of African Americans and Native Americans in Sturbridge and New England. This activity asks visitors true or false statements, such as, "There weren't *any* NATIVE AMERICANS or Indians living in New England by the 1830s," and "SLAVERY *did* not exist in NEW ENGLAND in the 1830s." The visitor must then lift the top flap to reveal the answer and can read several facts that expound on the main statement. This is a good idea to introduce visitors to the concept of multiple perspectives, but they must detour from the main entrance in order to view it. Furthermore, the information the visitor learns from the activity will not match what they see in the village. If the visitor is told about the presence of Native and African

Americans in Sturbridge in the 1830s, then it is plausible they will expect to see this perspective interpreted. Presently, they will be disappointed.

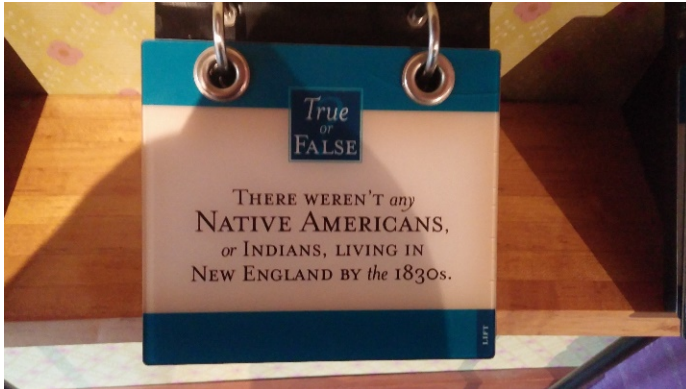


Figure 3.4 True or False “There weren’t any Native Americans, or Indians, living in New England by the 1830s.”

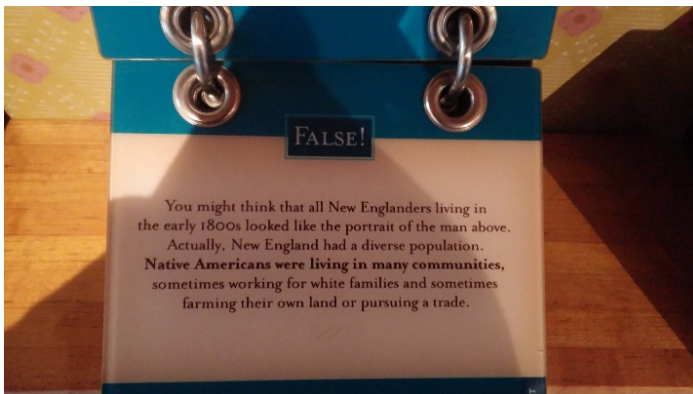


Figure 3.5 The answer is “False! You might think that all New Englanders living in the early 1800s looked like the portrait above. [portrait of an older white male] Actually, New England had a diverse population. Native Americans were living in many communities sometimes working for white families and sometimes farming their own land or pursuing a trade.”

Visitor orientation continues on a pathway that leads from the visitor center to the Village. Along it are five small signs that attempt to acquaint the visitor with the time period and the interpreters they will encounter in the village. The first sign reads, “Now entering an 1830s rural New England village,” with a picture of a hand pointing in the



Figure 3.6 True or False “Slavery *did* not exist *in* New England in the 1830s.”

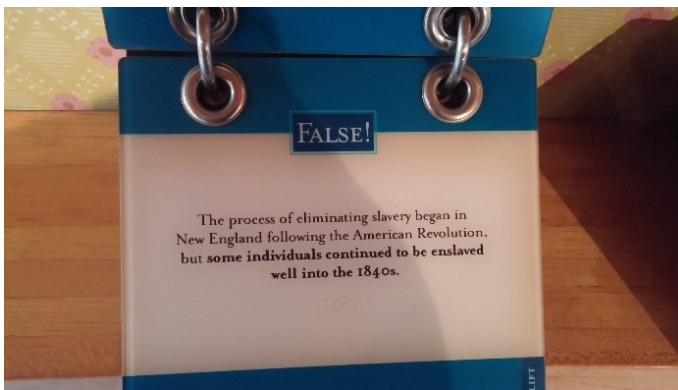


Figure 3.7 The answer is “False! The process of eliminating slavery began in New England following the American Revolution but some individuals continued to be enslaved well into the 1840s.

opposite direction of the visitor’s center. The final sign attempts to explain the role of the interpreter, “Costumed historians will help you understand the past and its relation to the present.” It seems likely these signs go unnoticed by most visitors.

But even for those visitors who stop to read the signs, it could be unclear what style the interpreters are using. Perhaps a better orientation sign might be, “Costumed historians will speak from a modern perspective to help you understand the past.” To introduce African and Native Americans and immigrants, separate signs could read; “Slavery was abolished in Massachusetts in 1783,” “Although an ethnic minority, Native Americans still had a presence in Massachusetts,” and “Many Irish and French-Canadians

immigrated to New England to work in the factories.” These sentences and ideas are intentionally short to increase the likelihood that the average visitor will read it while walking by. These signs, though brief, express very basic historical information and perhaps would spark further inquiry about the time period.

Aside from orientation, exhibitions are a way to introduce minority perspectives into the narrative by using stories, text, pictures, and objects to capture the attention of the visitor. One exhibit that demonstrated a minority perspective at Sturbridge was a temporary exhibit in 2002 titled “An Enduring People: Native American Life in Central New England.” This exhibit showcased Native groups in New England, specifically the



Figure 3.8 “Now entering an 1830s Rural New England Village.”



Figure 3.9 “The American Revolution Ended over 50 years ago. The Civil War is still a generation away.”



Figure 3.10 “The Erie Canal opened in 1825. A railroad connects Boston and Worcester, 44 miles.”



Figure 3.11 “Costumed historians will help you understand the past and its relation to the present.” Not pictured, “Ohio, Illinois, and Kentucky are ‘the West.’ New England has over 1000 factories.”

Nipmuc in Worcester County, Massachusetts. It also demonstrated the presence of Native people and their culture and how their survival was linked to the African American community in Sturbridge through interaction and intermarriage. Ed Hood and Jack Larkin, both scholars working at OSV in the early 2000s, used census records from 1790 to 1850 to show the geographic mobility, land ownership, occupations, and characteristics of family life for the Native tribes and African Americans in New

England.⁵² The exhibit included many Native American artifacts from the area, such as baskets and woven textiles. Because of the significant research behind this exhibit, especially on a topic that is not frequently discussed or depicted, this exhibit should become a permanent installation. Permanent exhibit space is a challenge at OSV and current structures need major updating. There should be consideration given to inclusion of a permanent exhibit, aside from the Small House, that looks at Native and African American experiences at Sturbridge. Since the foundation has already been laid with the extensive research done by Hood and Larkin, this could open up new conversations about other minority perspectives at the village, including, but not limited to, immigrants and the lower class.

A possible solution to the lack of space for permanent exhibits is to increase the number of online exhibitions. There are already several exhibitions online, including one of their most successful exhibits, “A Child’s World: Childhood in 19th century New England.” “An Enduring People” is an exhibit that should be online. Not only would this provide information for those unable to physically visit the site, but it would showcase the research of Native and African American perspective in Sturbridge. Although lack of time, interest, and funding are hindrances to this being accomplished, the collections team could write a grant for a fellow who would come in to work on the website and create online exhibits based on exhibits already completed. This is a seemingly quick fix and an important step in the right direction.

Despite this wealth of research and information, most of it is not readily available to the public. The exhibitions and a database that includes articles on the history of the

⁵² Larkin, John. “How They Endured.” *Old Sturbridge Visitor* 42, n.2 (2002): 4-6.

village and New England history are available online. Regrettably, the database is not easily accessible from the main OSV webpage. If the public or researchers cannot access the information, then it might as well not exist. A large part of the problem is the OSV website. There is no direct link to the database from the main page, so the only way to access those articles is by typing the article name into a search engine. People who know where to look and what they are looking for can access the research, but that should not be the target audience. OSV should be bringing in new scholars and drawing public interest and attention. Problems in sharing the database and fixing the website include staff time and expertise, lack of funding, and lack of interest in hiring someone to fix the problem since it is considered a low priority.

Another way to increase diversity and minority perspectives at OSV is through their internship program. OSV already has a well-established internship program that pulls students from all types of backgrounds and from various locations and places them in almost all departments at the village, including collections, interpretation, education, development, and marketing. OSV could specifically advertise for interns who would be willing to work on diversity at the site. These interns could work on projects or exhibits that would increase minority perspectives at the village. With the opportunity for housing and scholarships, OSV has the ability to reach a more diverse group of students from across the country to work on projects that will greatly benefit the site. This would help alleviate the problem of shortage of staff or lack of funding for a full staff member. Although it is only a temporary fix, this would be an excellent way to bring in enthusiastic, passionate students with fresh ideas and time dedicated solely to the diversity issue. The Minnesota Historical Society is putting this idea into practice by

offering diversity stipends. Financial aid is available for students from minorities historically underrepresented in the public history field. Their aim is to diversify the public history field, increase participation by minority students, and increase accessibility of museums to young adults and students. The Society recognizes that their history remains incomplete without the stories and contribution of minority groups. The Minnesota Historical Society is setting an example within the museum field that should be followed by all types of museums, including living history museums. Furthermore, a partnership with collegiate institutions in the area would bring in scholars and students to conduct research, work on projects, and assist with reinterpretation to include diversity. The many colleges in Massachusetts, especially in the Boston area, are an untapped resource of established and upcoming academics in various disciplines providing insight to the village.

Conclusion

Museums researching and interpreting a more inclusive historical narrative are not only revealing a more accurate portrayal of the past, but have the potential to appeal to a more diverse audience, representative of the modern multicultural society. Historic sites and museums can be sites of public dialogue and, instead of imparting knowledge, can facilitate intellectual exchange between visitors, communities, and museum staff.⁵³ This shift is a reflection of a greater recognition and acceptance of the past and modern world as a multicultural society. Museums have been seen as “conveyors of cultural values, and

⁵³ Susan Ferentinos, *Interpreting LGBT History at Museums and Historic Sites*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014), 2, 11.

by extension, relations of power.”⁵⁴ As the historic, and often homogenous, national narrative is challenged, cultural institutions need to revisit and reevaluate their interpretation to reveal a more inclusive narrative. Part of the responsibility of costumed historians at living history sites is to make the past engaging and relevant to a variety of audiences. However, when visitors encounter costumed staff and interpretation that does not reflect the diversity of the past at the site, the visitor is getting a distorted view of history. This is a particular problem at Old Sturbridge Village, which has been struggling with the issue of diversity since its opening in 1946. OSV already has an incredible source base of research and, by utilizing information already gathered, they can insert minority perspectives into the narrative through interpretation and exhibitions. Many of the reasons behind this disparity are larger concerns within the museum world, such as low wages, limited applicant pool, and changing priorities to focus on money making endeavors.

Most of the suggestions proposed are not instantaneous solutions. It is not enough to say that diversity in museums is important. Words need to be turned into action, but action can be slow moving and cost time, money, and effort. However, the emphasis on diversity initiatives will not go away. Panels at conferences, blogs on museum websites, and articles in journals from graduate students and museum professionals across the museum field are demanding a reassessment and a change of practices and representation. Museum Advisors conducted a survey of visitors to outdoor history museums in 2008 and asked questions about museums exhibiting or interpreting minority perspectives. 69% of respondents said it was “extremely important to them that the

⁵⁴ Ibid., 11.

stories of all races and cultures relating to a site or its objects should be shared,” while 26% said it was “only somewhat important” and only 5% said “not important at all.”⁵⁵ The results seem to indicate that not only would visitors be responsive to minority perspectives and diverse interpretation, but they expect it. The future success of OSV might depend on how administration and interpretation staff heed the call from museum professionals and visitors alike.

⁵⁵ The study revealed that those who said that multiple perspectives was “somewhat important” were overall less enthusiastic about museums and less likely to donate to museums for community outreach programs. The survey also asked how visitors felt about museums discussing controversial topics. 62% said the “uglier aspects of our past are an important part of history and should be shared with visitors,” 30% “preferred a more delicate approach,” 1% said that museums were not “appropriate settings for these issues.” Reach Advisors, “Difficult Issues, Inclusive History,” *Museum Audience Insight* (blog), July 8, 2008, http://reachadvisors.typepad.com/museum_audience_insight/2008/07/difficult-issues-inclusive-history.html

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